

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5794
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 6293

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, MY
SUBJECT: MALAYSIAN ELECTIONS

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 5599 DTG 130200Z JUN 78

1. SUMMARY. THE JUNE 21 NOMINATIONS FOR THE MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENTARY AND STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS REVEAL THAT THE NATIONAL FRONT (NF) WILL FACE CONSIDERABLY MORE OPPOSITION ON JULY 8 THAN DURING THE LAST ELECIONS IN 1974, MAINLY BECAUSE THE ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS) HAS LEFT THE NG. WHILE THE OPPOSITION IS FIELDING LARGE NUMBERS OF CANDIDATES, THE OPPOSITION PARTIES ARE NOT AS WELL ORGANIZED AS THE NF AND WILL BE ABLE TO CUT INTO NF STRENGTH ONLY WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY. AS EXPECTED, PUBLIC RALLIES HAVE BEEN BANNED DURING THE CAMPAIGN. AT THIS JUNCTURE THERE SEEM TO BE NO MAJOR CHALLENGES TO INDIVIDUAL GOM LEADERS. END SUMMARY.

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2. BY THE END OF NOMINATION DAY JUNE 21, ONLY 9 PARLIAMENTARY AND 17 STATE ASSEMBLY CANDIDATES FROM THE NF WERE RETURNED UNOPPOSED; IN 1974 NF CANDIDATES WERE UNOPPOSED IN 47 PARLIAMENTARY AND 43 STATE CONSTITUENCIES. THIS MARKED DECREASE IN THE NUMBER OF NF CANDIDATES ELECTED WITHOUT OPPOSITION IS DUE MAINLY TO THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE NF OF THE RELIGIOUS-BASED ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS), WHICH IS FIELDING 90

PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES IN THE 114 SEATS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA DN IS STRONGLY CONTESTING MOST OF THE STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. THE OTHER MAJOR OPPOSITION PARTY, THE CHINESE-DOMINATED DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY (DAP), WILL PUT UP 52 PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES AND IS CONTESTING MOST STATE SEATS IN URBAN AREAS AS WELL AS IN RURAL AREAS OF PERAK AND SELANGOR. PARTI BERJASA, WHICH WAS FORMED FROM PAS DISSIDENTS WHO REMAINED LOYAL TO THE NF IN KELANTAN DURING THE STATE ELECTION THERE LAST MARCH, SPLIT JUST BEFORE NOMINATION DAY ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER TO JOIN TH NF; AS A RESULT, THE PARTY IS CONTESTING ONLY A HANDFUL OF SEATS AND SHOULD HAVE LITTLE BEARING ON THE ELECTION'S OUTCOME. ALTHOUGH 15 OTHER PARTIES ARE PUTTING UP CANDIDATES, ONLY THE SARAWAK-BASED PAJAR HAS AS MANY AS 13 PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES AND NONE OF THE OTHERS HAS MORE THAN SEVEN. THE NF, HOWEVER, HAS NOMINATED CANDIDATES FOR VIRTUALLY ALL SEATS.

3. ALTHOUGH FEW MAJOR GOM LEADERS ARE UNOPPOSED THIS ELECTION (IN CONTRAST WITH 1974 WHEN MANY MINISTERS HAD NO OPPONENTS AND COULD CONCENTRATE ON CAMPAIGNING FOR OTHER CANDIDATES), FEW OF THEM FACE SERIOUS OPPOSITION. PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN ONN AND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER MAHATHIR BOTH HAVE 35 YEAR-OLD PAS OPPONENTS; PAS, IN FIELDING SUCH YOUNG CANDIDATES IN CONSERVATIVE RURAL CONSTITUENCIES, SEEMS NOT TO BE MAKING A SERIOUS EFFORT AGAINST EITHER MAN, DESPITE THE PARTY'S EARLY THREAT TO TOPPLE MAHATHIR. FOREIGN MINISTER TENGKU RITHAUDDEEN AND FINANCE MINISTER TENGKU RAZALEIGH ALSO BOTH

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HAVE PAS OPPONENTS, BUT NEITHER IS SEEN TO BE IN DANGER OF LOSING HIS SEAT. CULTURE, YOUTH AND SPORTS MINISTER SAMAD IDRIS, HEALTH MINISTER CHONG HON NYAN, AND SABAH CHIEF MINISTER HARRIS SALLEH ALL WERE RETURNED UNOPPOSED IN THEIR PARLIAMENTARY SEATS. DEPUTY HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER RAIS YATIM, WHO IS TIPPED TO BECOME THE NEXT CHIEF MINISTER OF NEGRI SEMBILAN, HAD NO OPPOSITION IN HIS STATE ASSEMBLY SEAT (HE WAS NOT NOMINATED FOR PARLIAMENT). HE IS THEREFORE LIKELY TO LEAVE NATIONAL POLITICS FOR THE TIME BEING AND GIVE UP HIS ROLE AS THE GOM'S CHIEF SPONESMAN FOR NARCOTICS CONTROL MATTERS.

4. OTHER NOMINATIONS OF INTEREST INCLUDE: PAS PRESIDENT DATUK HAJI ASRI MUDA WHO WILL BE RUNNING IN A KEDAH PARLIAMENTARY SEAT (HIS ORIGINAL BASE WAS KELANTAN, WHERE PAS WAS CLOBBERED LAST MARCH); FORMER AMBASSADOR US KHIR JOHARI, WHO WAS RENOMINATED FOR HIS KEDAH PARLIAMENTARY SEAT DESPITE HIS OUTSPOKEN CRITICISM OF THE HUSSEIN ONN ADMINISTRATION; AND FORMER US INTERNATIONAL VISITOR PROGRAM (IVP) PARTICIPANTS ADIB ADAM (UMNO EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, RUNNING FOR A MALLACCA STATE ASSEMBLY SEAT AND RUMORED TO BE IN LINE FOR THE MALACCA CHIEF MINISTER'S POST) AND SHAHRIR ABDUL SAMAD (PM'S POLITICAL SECRETARY WHO OBSERVED THE 1976 US ELECTIONS AND WHO IS RUNNING FOR A

JOHORE BHARU PARLIAMENTARY SEAT).

5. THE OPPOSITION, WHICH FEELS ITSELF AT A DISADVANTAGE IN FACING THE NF IN ANY CASE BECAUSE OF GOM CONTROL OF THE MEDIA, GERRYMANDERING AND THE USE OF DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES TO AID NF CANDIDATES, IS PARTICULARLY GRIEVED BY TWO DEVELOPMENTS SO FAR IN THIS ELECTION. FIRST, AS EXPECTED PM HUSSEIN ANNOUNCED JUNE 19 THAT THE GOM WOULD BAN PUBLIC RALLIES DURING THE CAMPAIGN FOR SECURITY REASONS. (ACTUALLY, INDOOR GATHERINGS WILL BE ALLOWED; THEY ARE EASIER FOR THE POLICE TO CONTROL THAN MASS OUTDOOR MEETINGS AND LESS VULNERABLE TO TERRORIST INCIDENTS.)
OPPOSITION LEADERS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 6293

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

HAVE PROTESTED THAT THE BAN ON RALLIES IS AIMED AGAINST THEIR PARTIES SINCE THEY HAVE TO RELY ON PUBLIC SPEECHES TO LARGE GATHERINGS TO SPREAD THEIR WORD WIDELY WHILE THE NF HAS MUCH EASIER ACCESS TO RADIO, TV AND THE PRESS. SECONDLY, AN UNUSUALLY LARGE NUMBER OF POTENTIAL CANDIDATES' NOMINATION PAPERS (BUT FEWER THAN 5 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL) WERE REJECTED ON TECHNICAL GROUNDS ON NOMINATION DAY. WHILE SEVERAL NF POLITICIANS WERE THUS DISQUALIFIED FROM RUNNING (ONE A PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATE), MOTS OF THE INVALID PAPERS BELONGED TO INDEPENDENTS OR MEMBERS OF OPPOSITION PARTIES. (10 - 15 PER CENT OF THE DAP CANDIDATES WERE SO DISQUALIFIED.) THE OPPOSITION HAS ACCUSED THE RETURNING OFFICERS

(MOST OF WHOM ARE GOM LOCAL OFFICIALS) OF CONSCIOUS BIAS AGAINST THE OPPOSITION IN SCRUTINIZING NOMINATION PAPERS. THE NF HAS COMMENTED THAT THE DISQUALIFICATION OF NF CANDIDATES IS PROOF THAT THE NOMINATION PROCESS WAS FAIR.

6. COMMENT. WHILE THERE MAY BE SOME LEGITIMACY TO THE OPPOSITION CLAIMS THAT THE BAN ON RALLIES AND THE DISQUALIFICATION OF THE CONFIDENTIAL

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CREDENTIALS OF A NUMBER OF POTENTIAL CANDIDATES ARE INTENDED TO ENHANCE THE NF'S CHANCES, WE WOULD NOT, HOWEVER, CHARACTERIZE THESE, AS HAVE SOME OPPOSITION LEADERS, AS WHOLESALVE VIOLATIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS. PM HUSSEIN IS NO DOUBT AWARE OF THE ADVANTAGE A BAN ON RALLIES WILL GIVE THE NF, BUT HE HAS CONSISTENTLY CALLED SECURITY THE NO. 1 RESPONSIBILITY OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND WANTS BOTH TO AVOID THE UNHEALTHY EMOTIONALISM THAT PUBLIC RALLIES GENERATE AND TO DENY COMMUNIST SUBVERSIVES AN EASY CHANCE TO ASSASSINATE PUBLIC FIGURES OR USE OTHER TERRORIST MEASURES TO UNDERMINE PUBLIC MORAL (THE POLICE HAVE BEEN WORRIED BY THE FACT THAT ELECTIONEERING COINCIDES WITH THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEGINNING OF THE COMMUNIST INSURGENCY IN JUNE, 1948). WHILE THE BAN DOES CIRCUMSCRIBE OPPOSITION ELECTIONEERING, IT ALSO PROVIDES THE DAP AND PAS WITH A POPULAR ISSUE TO USE AGAINST THE GOM. AS FOR THE SPOILED NOMINATION PAPERS, LOCAL OBSERVERS FEEL THAT VARIOUS RETURNING OFFICERS MAY HAVE INDEED BEEN A BIT OVERZEALOUS IN EXAMINING THE CREDENTIALS OF OPPOSITION CANDIDATES. HOWEVER, NO MAJOR OPPOSITION FIGURES WERE DENIED A PLACE ON THE BALLOT AND ONLY A HANDFUL OF TRADITIONAL OPPOSITION SEATS WERE HANDED TO THE NF BY THE DISQUALIFICATION OF OPPOSITION CANDIDATES. ANY IRREGULARITIES THAT DID OCCUR SEEM TO HAVE BEEN JUST LOCAL AND NOT PART OF THE NF OVERALL STRATEGY.

7. ON THE SURFACE IT APPEARS THAT THE NF FACES A MUCH STRONGER OPPOSITION THAN IT DID IN 1974 AND MIGHT SEE AN EROSION OF ITS POSITION SINCE IT HAD 128 OF 154 SEATS WHEN THE LAST PARLIAMENT WAS DISSOLVED AND CONTROLLED ALL OF THE STATE ASSEMBLIES. IN 1974 THE NF HELD 47 PARLIAMENTARY SEATS EVEN BEFORE THE POLLS OPENED, FACED ON VIABLE MALAY OPPOSITION, AND HAD THE OPPOSITION ON THE LEFT SPLIT INTO THREE MAJOR FACTIONS (DAP, PEKEMAS AND THE MALAY-BASED PEOPLES SOCIALIST PARTY). IN THE 1978 ELECTION PAS IS RUNNING A LARGE SLATE OF OPPOSITION CANDIDATES, THE DAP STANDS OUT AS THE ONLY SERIOUS SOCIALIST OPPOSITION PARTY AND MOST NF CONFIDENTIAL

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LEADERS FACE AT LEAST NOMINAL CHALLENGES IN THEIR OWN CONSTITUENCIES AND ARE THUS DISTRACTED FROM FULL-TIME NATIONAL

CAMPAIGNING. HOWEVER, AFTER ITS DISASTEROUS LOSS IN THE SPECIAL STATE ELECTION IN KELANTAN LAST MARCH, PAS STRENGTH IS SUSPECT. THE DAP HAS BEEN SHAKEN BY A SERIES OF DEFECTIONS (THE LATEST ON THE EVE OF NOMINATIONS) AS IT GEARED UP FOR THE ELECTIONS. WHAT-EVER THE GOM MOTIVATION FOR BANNING PUBLIC RALLIES, THIS MOVE WILL HAMPER THE OPPOSITION, ESPECIALLY THE DAP, WHICH HAS TRADITIONALLY RELIED ON RALLIES TO PUT ITS DYNAMIC LEADERS BEFORE LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE IN THE CITIES. MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE NF, ESPECIALLY THE UNITED MALAYS NATIONAL ORGANIZATION (UMNO) CAN COMMAND THE VOTES OF THE GREAT MAJORITY OF MALAY VOTERS (FOR WHATEVER REASONS: POPULARITY, THE PROMISE OF DEVELOPMENT, MALAY FEUDAL LOYALTY TO SUPERIORS) AND BECAUSE OF WEIGHT-ING GIVEN RURAL CONSTITUENCIES MALAY VOTERS DOMINATE OR HOLD THE BALANCE OF POWER IN ALL BUT ABOUT 20-25 OF THE 114 PENINSULAR MALAYSIA PARLIAMENTARY SEATS. (THE NF ALSO FACES LITTLE SERIOUS OPPOSITION IN SABAH AND SARAWAK) THUS, WHILE THE NF MAY LOSE SOME PARLIAMENTARY SEATS, WE DO NOT THINK THE LOSSES WILL BE GREAT. LIKEWISE, IT IS VERY UNLIKELY THE NF WILL LOSE CONTROL OF ANY OF THE 10 STATE ASSEMBLIES BEING CONTESTED, ALTHOUGH THE RACES IN PERAK AND KEDAH MIGHT BE CLOSE.

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